

ZOSIA

A Story

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After a month of fierce offensive battles—in forests, in sand and swamps—after a month of man traps, and hundreds of deaths, when we had advanced all the way to Poland, and were somewhere near Białystok with only a handful of men remaining in our blood-soaked battalion, we were suddenly taken off the front-line under cover of night and sent to the rear for rest and reinforcement.

And so what was left of our motorized infantry battalion found itself in a small and no doubt quite ordinary Polish village called Nowy Dwór.

After sleeping out entire day I awoke on a hot July morning. The sun was up already; there was a smell of honey and apples, and an overwhelming silence reigned. It was all so unaccustomed that I spent several seconds staring at my surroundings before I realized what had happened and where I was.

Our shovel-mounted Dodge stood in an orchard, under a tall and spreading pear-tree, beside the rear wall of a large and prosperous-looking peasant house. In the tack-bed, on the hay, right by its side, his ground-sheet pulled over his head, slept my friend Senior Lieutenant Victor Bekeev. Just half a month before he and I had been mere company commanders, but after a direct order from our headquarters Victor had assumed the duties of battalion commander, and I became his chief of staff—or more precisely, adjutant.

I jumped down onto the grass, stretched, and strolled up and down alongside the truck.

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Our shovel-snouted Dodge stood in an orchard, under a tall and spreading pear-tree, beside the rear wall of a large and prosperous-looking peasant house. In the tuck-bed, on the hay, right beside me, his ground-sheet pulled over his head, slept my friend Senior Lieutenant Victor Baikov. Just half a month before he and I had been mere company commanders, but after a direct mortar hit on our headquarters Victor had assumed the duties of battalion commander, and I became his chief of staff—or more precisely, adjutant.

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* English translation © Progress Publishers 1982

Seated on the ground by the tailgate, clasping a submachine gun with both hands, slept our sentry, a youthful radio-operator with a bandage-swathed head. In the last week the shortage of personnel had forced us to keep most of the lightly wounded in action; some, in fact, were themselves unwilling to leave the battalion.

I looked into his dirty, haggard face and shooed away the fat flies crawling along the dark spot of blood that showed through the bandage. He was sleeping so soundly and sweetly that I did not have the heart to wake him.

Under a captured blanket in a corner of the truck-bed I found the food Victor's orderly had prepared. I ate a hunk of rye bread with great appetite, and washed it down with a whole jug of baked milk. Then I took a little book of poems—Yessenin, with a cover made from a scrap of oilcloth—out of my haversack, I got half a cake of harsh soap out of Victor's bag, found a gap in the fence, and crawled through it into the street.

The cobblestoned road ran through the village lengthwise. A little way off to the right it disappeared around a corner; to the left it crossed a wooden bridge over a narrow stream. I made for the stream.

From the bridge the sandy bottom, lit by the sun, was visible down to the tiniest pebbles through the crystal-clear water. Schools of fish with silvery shining scales glided and darted about everywhere. An enormous black crayfish was crawling from one bank over towards the other, waving his long antennae, leaving behind a track of minute furrows.

About seventy paces downstream three men stood waist-deep in the water, their backs to the bridge. They were bent over, intent on some task. One of them I recognized as Zelenko, the battalion's favourite, an accordion player and grenade thrower who had destroyed four enemy tanks during the battles on the Dnieper alone. They were talking quietly, groping among the snags and along the banks: they were after crayfish, or maybe fish.

The branches of a nearby willow were hung with the uniforms which they had just laundered. There too, on the bank, two mess-tins were suspended over a small fire; on an outspread trench I could see a can, some earthenware pots, a loaf of bread, and a little heap of cucumbers.

The men were wholly absorbed in their fishing; I did not call to them. That morning I wanted more than anything else to be alone. I went down to the stream on the other

side of the road, and followed the path along the bank.

It was a splendid day. The sun shone and warmed, but did not scorch mercilessly as it had all the last week. A fresh, strong aroma of honey-laden flowers and dew rose from the tall, succulent grass in the meadow, from the earth itself. Grasshoppers trilled merrily and steadily, in admirable harmony, through the silence.

Pale-blue dragonflies, flashing bits of mother-of-pearl, hovered directly over the mirror-like water and above the bank. I tried, without luck, to catch one so I could get a closer look.

It was a pleasure to breathe that marvellous, sweet-scented air. I walked slowly along the bank, examining everything around me and rejoicing in it.

How fast life can change! It seemed simply incredible that not long ago I had crouched, tormented by heat, tension, and thirst, in a machine-gun nest on Elevation 114 (I was a good shot; in battle I took the machine gun whenever possible), firing short bursts, mowing down Germans—all of them strapping fellows—from the *Feldherrnhalle*, a grenadier tank division of the SS, as they stubbornly dodged and crept up the slope.

It was somehow impossible to believe that just a short while back, when the cartridges had run out and there were no more grenades, about thirty Germans had rushed over the top and into our trenches and, maddened by a terrible blow on my helmet, I fought hand-to-hand armed with a spare machine gun barrel; exhausted and panting, I rolled over and over on the ground with a hefty SS man who was trying, rather successfully, to strangle me; and then, when someone else finished him off, I grabbed a shovel and used it to cut down another German.

All that had been two days before; but I had slept for one whole day, and just woken up. For that reason, and because of the overpowering impression the battle had left, it all seemed to have happened just a few hours earlier.

I opened my book as I strolled along, and was about to begin reading aloud to myself. But then I decided to get all the less pleasant, but necessary, tasks taken care of first. On a little sandy beach I kicked off my boots, undressed quickly, and gave two vigorous washings to my tunic and trousers—they were soaked with sweat, dust, gun oil, and someone's blood—and to my foot-wrappers and cap, which were literally black. After wringing these things out thoroughly I hung them on the branches of a hazel-nut bush to dry. Then I got into the water, rinsed out my improvised bathing trunks, and set to washing

myself. After soaping up I dug at my scalp with my nails, going at it with a luxurious ferocity, and then scraped and rubbed my skin with sand until it was red and in places scratched. It had been three weeks since my last real bath, and the water around me immediately turned murky-dark, as it had when I laundered my clothes.

Afterwards I swam. I dived with open eyes and chased schools of fry through the clear water. I gathered shells and bright pebbles from the sandy bottom, picking out the prettiest and most interesting of them. I had decided to put together a small collection while we were billeted there. Back home, on the outskirts of Moscow, I had a whole trunkful of unusual pebbles and shells of all kinds stored away; my passion for collecting them went back to early childhood.

After a while I climbed back onto the bank, feeling greatly refreshed. There was a pleasant lightness all through my body; it was as if I had been re-born. I turned over my tunic and trousers, which were drying quickly on the bush. Finally, conscience at ease, I picked up my book.

I loved poetry, and read it at every opportunity, but it was only recently I had discovered Yesenin: at the beginning of the campaign I had found a one-volume selection of his poems in some ruins outside Mogilyov; the book astonished and enchanted me.

On the front-line I had often, with hunger and delight, read snatches from it, finding in it confirmation of my own thoughts and longings. I already knew many of the quatrains by heart, and would recite them, usually to myself, whether or not they were apropos. But I had not yet had an opportunity to give myself up entirely, in quiet surroundings, to Yesenin's poetry.

I began saying the poems over, at times from the book, at times from memory. I started with the early, youthful ones.

*Dear furrows and fields, in your sorrow
As noble and fine as before!
I love, too, these tumbledown cottages
Where grey mothers wait by the door.*

*Hey, Russia, my kind mother country,
Your loving son ever I'll stay.
How gaily your meadows with laughter
In springtime re-echo all day.**

* Poetry translations in the story are by Peter Tempest.

The bright river between banks overgrown with willows, the newly-mown meadow with its ricks of green hay, the young birches on the other bank, the golden rye reaching right to the horizon, even the sky, brilliant blue with feathery wisps of cloud—all of it reminded me achingly of the immemorial Russian heartland, and especially of the little village outside Moscow where my mother was born and where most of my childhood passed. Everything around me was in striking harmony with Yesenin's verses, with his ecstatic love for his own little corner of Russia, for its expanses of field and meadow, for its nature and people.

I read—or rather, recited—with great emotion; one hand waving, I repeated once again, and then a third time, the part I liked best:

*Many thoughts in silence I've been thinking,
Many songs about myself I've penned,
And upon this earth grim and forbidding
I am glad I breathed and my life spent.*

*I am happy that I have kissed women.
Picked wild flowers and in soft grass lain,
And that beasts, who are our younger brothers,
I have never beaten, never slain.*

Oh, how grand that was, how fine! I read on and on, drinking in great gulps of poetry; it moved me to tears. I was oblivious to everything else.

*... O Life, were you real, or of fancy born?
It's as if in spring I've been out riding
On a pink horse in the vibrant dawn.*

I was under a spell, in a world of my own. I have no idea what it was that made me turn round; behind me, between two bushes, a girl stood looking at me curiously. She was about seventeen, not tall, and unusually pretty.

She was not laughing. No—her face showed only curiosity or interest. But I thought I could see sparks of laughter in her eyes, which were greenish, shining, and mysterious.

I was overcome with embarrassment, and at that very instant she disappeared. I had a glimpse of small, bare feet and a strong, well-proportioned figure under a faded dress she had obviously outgrown. I also noticed a basket on her arm.

She had appeared out of nowhere and vanished suddenly

and silently, like a fairy-tale vision. But of course I did not believe in miracles; it even seemed to me that she must be hiding in the bushes. Hastily I pulled on my trousers—no doubt I had been a comical sight, declaiming verses in the bathing trunks I had improvised from material intended for foot-wrappers. I hunted all through the bushes without finding the girl or any visible trace of her.

Deep in thought, I returned to the bank of the stream and opened my book. I wanted to go back to my reading, but could not; it seemed something was missing. What sort of nonsense was this? What could possibly be missing? Then suddenly it came to me, clear as the day, that I wanted very much to see that girl again—if only for a minute, if only with one eye.

I hid for a while under a bush, listening, hoping she would re-appear. Why shouldn't she come back? Was I going to eat her, or harm her in some way?

The birds chirped quietly, with a spring-time gladness; in the grass the incessant grasshopper trill continued. But try as I might I could hear no footsteps not even a rustle.

What I did hear soon was the sound of an engine, distant, but getting nearer. A minute or so later, looking round, I saw a jeep cross slowly over the bridge; I recognized the officer in the front seat as the commander of our brigade, Lieutenant-Colonel Antonov. I could well imagine what would happen if he caught both the sentry and the battalion commander sleeping. I got dressed in a feverish hurry. The jacket and trousers were still damp in places; I tugged at them, trying to smooth them out a little, and rushed at full speed towards the village.

I was hoping desperately that the brigade commander would pass us by, headed for some other battalion, or that he would not see our Dodge and go all the way down to the far end of the village, so that I could manage to get there in time. But when I got out into the village street I saw his car parked in front of the house where we were staying.

I had not got as far as the gate when the lieutenant-colonel appeared from the yard. He was a tall man, and cut a dashing figure: fresh, carefully ironed trousers, medal insignia on his tunic, a cap that looked brand-new, and boots shined to a brilliant lustre. An artificial hand in a tight glove of sleek black leather hung motionless from his left sleeve. He was about thirty-five, but to me, at nineteen, he seemed elderly. He ordered his driver to go on, and silently returned my salute, raising his hand to his cap. Throwing a swift, scowling look over me, he inquired:

"Has a cow been chewing at you, by some chance? Don't you have anywhere to get things ironed?" He took the book out of my hands, opened it with two strong, deft fingers, looked into it, and gave it back.

At that minute Victor came hurrying out through the gate, buttoning his collar and rubbing his eyes. He peered about sleepily. He was without his cap and beltless, dirty and unshaven.

"Marvellous!" exclaimed the lieutenant-colonel. "The battalion commander dead asleep, the chief of staff reading pretty verses, and the men left to themselves! No guard posted, just one sentry—and he's asleep. This is a farce! Unthinkable irresponsibility!"

Victor stared at me in incomprehension and dismay. Only then did I remember: the night before last, as we piled into the truck about four kilometers from the front-line, he had ordered me to post a guard when we arrived and to draw up a plan of action in case of enemy attack. But the men were on the point of collapse from exhaustion, and no German attack was expected. (They were fighting back ferociously, and even making counter-attacks, but only over short distances, to cover themselves.) What is more, I had been able to see, as we travelled to the rear, that there were units of the second echelon between the front-line and Nowy Dwór, which would protect us from sudden attack. With these assurances, unable to keep awake any longer, I had sunk at once into sleep.

There could be no doubt that I alone was to blame, but I did not dare say so; the brigade commander did not like excuses, and would not tolerate argument. It was thought that if he was displeased the best thing to do was to keep silent. The fault was mine, but it was Victor who would be held responsible, and I knew that no matter how hard it went for him he would not say a word against me.

We stood before the brigade commander: I at attention, face red, looking at him guiltily; Victor with his head down like a bull about to charge.

"What is the reason for this? Explain yourselves!" the lieutenant-colonel demanded after a short pause. "Is the war over, perhaps?" he asked acidly, without a trace of a smile. "In that case you would do well to notify your commanding officers; they would be glad to hear the news!"

After another pause he declared angrily:

"You can fight when you have to, but take you out of battle and you're not worth a damned thing! One of you sleeping,

the other off somewhere reading poetry, and your men stark-naked in the middle of the village going in for a dip, as if they were on the beach! No doubt they're drinking vodka, too!"

"The men are exhausted," Victor brought out in a hoarse voice, although he should have kept quiet. "They deserve some rest."

"This isn't rest, it's demoralization!" roared the brigade commander. "You are inexperienced. You fail to understand elementary truths. Inactivity ruins an army. It may be we'll stay here a month and a half, or even two, waiting for our equipment and reinforcements arrive. What are you going to do, just lie around and loaf? You'll wreck this whole battalion! Starting tomorrow, two hours of drill every morning for all personnel! And three hours study of regulations and tactics—every day!"

From the depths of the courtyard came a sharp, unpleasant creak. The door of the big threshing barn swung open, and out of the darkness emerged Lieutenant Karev, the third of the battalion's surviving officers, who had just been made commander of a company. What a moment he had chosen to creep out! He stood on the grass in just his trousers, a long-legged skinny youngster, squinting in the sun. He did not see us. Smiling, he raised his arms over his head and thrust out his chest.

"See baby stretch!" the lieutenant-colonel hissed, holding back his anger. "Where d'you think you are?" he screamed. "And what about your plan of action in case of enemy attack? Have you given any thought to security?"

Victor snorted, and hurled a furious look at me from under his brows; an angry knot slid across the hollow of his cheek.

"I am asking the two of you. Have you provided for security?"

"Y-you understand, C-comrade Lieutenant-Colonel," I stammered and fell silent.

"We don't have any plan," said Victor grimly. "And no security provisions have been made either." He was not one to beat about the bush. "It was my oversight. I am responsible."

"I am dissatisfied with you," the lieutenant-colonel said to Victor in a masterful, angry voice; these words were his most extreme expression of disapproval. After a moment he turned to me: "Here you are, amusing yourself, but have you sent the reports required upon withdrawing from battle? Have you made out the death notices? The casualty lists?"

I made no answer. I felt utterly guilty.

"I'm giving you one hour. Post a guard, get things in order, and report to me."

After a short pause he added:

"Make things as comfortable for the men as possible. Double portions at dinner this afternoon. Pick up and distribute to all personnel one hundred grams of vodka each. But no sprees, and no women!"

He lifted his hand smartly to his cap, but as he turned to go, instead of the expected "Proceed!" he ordered: "Take a rest!"

Victor and I watched as he went towards his car with firm, quick steps. He got in, and the jeep rolled off and vanished round the corner.

Victor looked at me and at the volume of Yesenin in my hand. "You milksop," he sputtered, literally trembling with rage. Then came the words I had already heard from him more than once when my reading poetry had resulted in some lapse in the performance of duty; they were angry words, laden with an indescribable scorn! "Pure poppycock! Namby-pamby sentimentalism!"

2

About ten minutes later I was sitting at a little table in the garden hurriedly writing up documents. Unfortunately I was almost completely unfamiliar with battalion paper-work, and to make things worse I had a dislike right from my childhood, for all sorts of writing. But both our clerks had been killed; I would have to spend several days grinding away.

A master artillery sergeant-major and four other sergeants—our non-commissioned officers—reported in answer to an urgent summons. Lieutenant Karev came over too. Without looking up from my writing I informed them that they must immediately post a guard, make up reports according to three forms, detail a field kitchen, and send a car round to the brigade supply depot. As I expected, they began to argue: there were fourteen men left in one company and only five in another, two of them wounded; the men were catching up on their sleep, bathing, washing and drying their uniforms, and so on and so forth. A noisy squabble started up, but Victor pulled them up harshly and at once they all fell silent.

He stood shaving beside the truck, looking into the mirror and humming, or rather droning, some march tune—a sure sign that he was in a bad temper. Feeling guilty before him I struggled to get the reports ready in a hurry.

He did not say another word to me, but his orderly, Semyonov—a soldier with savvy and of unusual courage, but not one for discipline—got what for from him. Stationed as a sentry alongside the staff car, he was munching apples at his post. Another day Victor would have simply ignored this, but now he gave Semyonov a piece of his mind, and threatened to make him “peel potatoes in the mess for a month”.

I had dismissed the NCOs, having given the necessary orders, and gone back to my work when I heard a pleasant, melodious voice singing in Polish. I was startled to see that it was the girl I had caught a glimpse of in the bushes by the river.

She walked along the path through the orchard swinging a basket on her arm, stepping neatly and gracefully with her little sun-tanned feet as if she were doing a dance, and singing gaily. She pretended not to notice us.

The piece of bread Victor had raised to his mouth—he was finishing his breakfast—dropped back to his side; he stared after the girl like a man bewitched.

“Who’s that?” he asked, mouth still full, as soon as she had gone around the corner of the house. “Semyonov, who was that?”

“What d’you mean ‘who’? The daughter of the woman who lives here,” Semyonov answered sullenly.

“Ah so,” said Victor slowly. I could tell by his voice and face that the girl had made a great impression on him; my heart filled with dismay.

Victor was older, and incomparably more striking and personable than I was. He knew a thing or two about women already, and considered himself an inveterate heartbreaker—and so he seemed to me too.

“Cities are taken by bravery,” he would say seriously and significantly. “Women, by brazenness.”

He would pronounce these words with an expression that implied he had grasped some deep mystery, something neither I nor the others in his audience would ever comprehend.

I do not know where he heard that phrase, whom he borrowed it from. He said it, and I believed it.

Now, many years afterwards, I see clearly that Victor was no ladies’ man; he probably did not even know how to be brazen—it would not have been in his character. No doubt easy success with two or three lonely women he had chanced to meet during the war had gone to his head, given him an excess of masculine self-confidence. But back then I did not understand

any of this. I was convinced that he was irresistible, that he would inevitably be given preference. That was why I was so pained to see the impression the girl had made on him.

With a gloomy face he signed the documents I had ready, and at my request wrote his signature on several sheets of blank paper so that I could send off the most urgent reports even in his absence. Having done this he left for one of the sub-units.

He returned several hours later, after noon. In all that time I had not once looked up from my work. Because of my inexperience I kept getting confused, and had to recopy what I had already written. At last I dispatched two reports to brigade headquarters by motorcycle, and received in answer orders to submit at once reports according to five more forms, and to describe "all measures taken for camouflage, preservation of military secrets, anti-aircraft defence, anti-chemical defence, and anti-tank defence". I sank into utter despair. Our battalion had earlier employed three or four men in handling the endless paper-shuffling that engulfs headquarters when units are withdrawn from battle. They had barely managed to cope with the load that had now descended, in all its force and implacability, on me alone. My hand cramped and went numb, my head ached, I had trouble understanding even the simplest things. I felt that the work was too much for me, but there was no hope of aid: any soldier or sergeant I might want to take on as a helper would have to be cleared for secret work; Victor and Karev were busy with the men.

I envied them with all my soul. I longed to stretch my legs, to wander book in hand, through the rye fields beyond the village, to swim, to sunbathe on the river bank. Instead I sat like a galley slave and agonized over my writing, doing many of the reports over and over. Meanwhile Zosia—that was the girl's name—was busy helping her mother with the household chores. I could hear her clear voice over by the house, then in the garden, then somewhere very close by—behind me, or off to the side.

Each time she walked or ran through the orchard, humming to herself, dodging nimbly through the branches, my eyes would follow her light figure until it disappeared, and I would promise myself not to be distracted again. But when she came into sight again a little later, the same thing would happen all over.

Her mother, *Pani* Julia, a grey-haired woman of about forty-five with a kind, youthful face and tired, puffy eyes, was doing her laundry in the shade of the house; when she was

through, they both went into the garden. I could hear their quiet voices, Zosia's merry and full of life, her mother's slow and muffled.

At noon *Pani* Julia brought out a nearly full jug of fresh, warm milk. She said something, and put it on my table. I pronounced the words of thanks I had carefully learned, "*Bardzo dziękuję.*" When she had gone I drank some of it—it was delicious. I left more than half of it for Victor.

He returned in a good mood, full—as always—of energy and a thirst for action. He was as friendly as if nothing at all had happened that morning, as if the brigade commander had never taken him to task through my fault. He came up to my table and set two ripe yellow apples on it. Someone had treated him, evidently, and he had saved some for me. While I ate he squatted down beside me and described with great enthusiasm the sumptuous dinner he had organized in the battalion kitchen. Laughing, he told me that some of the men had not even come to eat it; there was plenty to eat in the village, and everyone was tired of food boiled in the common kettle.

Thereupon he offered to make his favourite dish—Siberian *pelmeni*. He jumped up and sent Semyonov off on a motorcycle to get hold of some flour and meat. He himself, after brushing the dust off his boots, went into the house to get acquainted with our hosts.

About five minutes later I saw him out in the yard by the woodpile; he had taken off his tunic, and was busy chopping firewood.

You could tell he had been accustomed from childhood to every kind of farm chore. He was agile and broad-chested, and literally strong as a bear. He went through the little pile of logs quickly and easily, like he was shelling peas, and helped *Pani* Julia stack the neat quarters. Then, while he waited for Semyonov, he sat in the yard where everyone could see him, lovingly tuning his guitar, quietly plucking at the strings, intent and self-important.

The instrument was his pride and joy, an expensive toy captured in the dugout of a German general: a concert guitar with exquisite mother-of-pearl encrustations, made by the famous Viennese craftsman Leopold Schenk himself—his name, together with three medals, was stamped in gold along the lower edge of the sound hole.

It was an instrument of rare beauty and tone, and Victor cherished it jealously. He would not willingly let even his friends

handle it, and this had more than once earned him a good-natured ragging. In time of battle the guitar was kept in the battalion's supply store, locked in a special case and swathed, for still greater protection, in captured blankets.

I heard Semyonov return; Victor expressed approval of the meat he had brought. About an hour later, when I went up to the house to get Victor's signature for some papers, preparations were in full swing.

Pani Julia was making a salad of cucumbers and radishes, with a sour-cream dressing. Victor, assisted by Semyonov and Zosia, was making quick work of fixing the *pelmeni*. Something was already stewing or frying on the broad tile stove.

Zosia was rolling bits of cut dough out into little pancakes; Semyonov was putting the meat through the mincer for a second or third time, to make it more tender.

Victor, with a clean handkerchief on his head in place of a chef's hat, was managing somehow to supervise, hurry things along, and give encouragement while performing the most difficult and responsible job himself: with the tip of his knife he deftly placed bits of minced meat onto the pancakes; having thus prepared several rows, he pinched the edges together with fleet, nimble fingers.

I thought it best not to go in; Victor took the papers and signed them on the window sill.

"Is there much more?" he asked.

"Enough and to spare," I answered with a sigh, watching Zosia's busily working hands out of the corner of my eye.

"Well, wind it up," he ordered, glancing at his watch. In a mock-official tone he announced: "There will be a slap-up dinner at sixteen-thirty hours. Full-dress uniforms. Attendance mandatory for all staff officers." He raised his hand playfully to the handkerchief on his head: "Carry on!"

3

I was the last to arrive. The hosts and other guests were already seated in the large, comparatively cool room at a table laid in holiday fashion with food and drink. Besides Karev, Semyonov and me there were three other guests, evidently invited by the hostess, Stefan, who was *Pani* Julia's first cousin—thin old man with an aquiline nose, a droopy moustache like a Cossack's, and bright blue eyes in a sunburned face; a neighbour woman with reddish gray hair who sat unsmiling, barely

saying five words in the course of the meal, and looked at us with obvious mistrust; and Wanda, a young, pretty woman with plucked eyebrows, a strong body, and a high, jutting bosom.

Victor was seated in state at the head of the table. *Pani* Julia sat beside him at one hand, Stefan at the other. When I came in the old man was telling how grim life had been under the Germans. Their visits to Nowy Dwór were not frequent, but sudden and quite devastating. They rummaged through the houses, barns, and cellars taking food and anything else that caught their eye. A year back they had cordoned off the village and rounded up all the men between seventeen and fifty-five. And when they were finally forced to retreat, they took all the horses with them—every last one.

The consequences of this most recent piece of brigandry seemed to concern Stefan more than any of the others.

"What are we supposed to do, ah?" he asked Victor in a worried voice. "Can't plough, can't fetch firewood. It's the end—for us."

He spoke Russian fluently and with no appreciable accent, frequently making apt use of colloquial expressions and old sayings. I learned later that he had been a soldier in the Tsar's army for many years, had fought the Japanese in Manchuria and the Germans too, ten years later, somewhere in Galicia. He would translate for us, whenever necessary, and conversation at the table was conducted mainly through him.

I sat down in the empty seat between Stefan and the silent Polish woman; opposite me were Karev and Zosia.

She had put on a flowered blouse with short sleeves for the occasion; round her neck I could see a fine silver chain, like the ones they wear crosses on. It was only later, though, that I took all of this in; at first, until I was a bit tipsy, I did not even dare raise my eyes to look at her.

For wartime the table was bountiful and extremely appetizing. There were plates with salads and cucumbers, little dishes full of sour-cream, two platters with pinkish slices of lard arrayed fanwise, a huge frying-pan, straight from the stove, with new potatoes, and towering stacks of bread of two kinds—our army bread, and the hostess', baked at home, fluffy and light-coloured, and never weighed out into rations. The main course—the *pelmeni*—were still to come; Victor was holding them back.

There was plenty to drink too: several pitchers of *bimber* (an aromatic and very strong liquor the Poles distill), the half-litre of vodka that Semyonov had been issued for the four

of us, and tall bottles of brown, foamy, home-brewed beer.

Victor's splendid guitar reposed on the chest of drawers behind Karev. Several photographs hung on the wall a little farther up; I noticed a pair of big pictures, both the same size, showing two men with somewhat similar faces—one young and the other elderly, both in Polish army uniforms.

Victor poured *bimber* for himself and Stefan, and passed the pitcher to Karev. He splashed a little vodka into my glass, casually remarking that I was not quite well.

That was not true; I simply was not one for drinking. Probably he was afraid I would get drunk.

"To the liberation of Poland," he said solemnly, getting to his feet, glass in hand.

We drank, and started in on the food.

I was hungry, but I felt a little embarrassed, and ate in small bites, slowly and carefully, trying not to be noisy about it and to hold the fork correctly; I had almost forgotten how.

Stefan continued his description of life under the Germans and their pillaging. Victor, who was going at the potatoes with a hearty appetite, listened without interrupting, but with no particular compassion. We had been through the Smolensk country and Byelorussia, had seen cities in ruins and villages burned to the ground, where there was not a cat—let alone a cow—to be found alive anywhere. After such awful devastation and poverty, Poland and Western Byelorussia, despite all they had suffered, could only surprise and gladden us with their relative plenty.

Victor could not bear being called *Pan*, the courtly form of address used in Poland. He had managed to do a little educational work already: Stefan, in speaking to him or another one of us, would say "comrade officer", or simply "comrade".

I had drunk only a small quantity of vodka, but after downing a glassful of the strong home-brew in two gulps I began to feel a bit more self-confident, and stole a peek—and then another—over at Zosia.

No, I had not been mistaken; it was no day-dream. Everything about her was enchanting: her lovely, animated face, her fine figure, the melody of her voice, her shining, dark-green eyes, and the good-natured curiosity with which she looked at us.

Her behaviour was simple and unconstrained, as befits a hostess. She helped her mother to serve the guests, ran out to the kitchen for dishes, smiled, and even raised some *bimber* to her lips when the rest of us drank—her nose wrinkled, but she took

a little swallow. Later she listened with unconcealed interest to Stefan's Russian, as if trying to discern what he was talking about and what impression his words were making on us. As she listened, she would let her hand wander, with a charming feminine gesture, up to smooth her thick, chestnut-coloured hair.

Sometimes her eyes would meet mine, for a second, sending a thrill through me: her eyes were friendly, encouraging, tender—and there was something else there too, something mysterious and exciting. It seemed to me that until that minute no one had ever given me such a look.

Karev, whose father was a professor in Leningrad, proved to be the most gallant of us. He attended to the ladies, putting food onto their plates, offering them bread, and pouring beer into their glasses. I decided to follow his example: I scooped up a big lump of salad in a table spoon, and was about to put it on Wanda's plate, but she hastily cried, "*Dziękuję, nie!*" in a gay voice, and reinforced her words with an energetic shake of her head. The others looked up. In my embarrassment I brushed a tall vase full of sour-cream with my sleeve and nearly overturned it. I decided right then and there not to look for any more trouble.

Victor usually got on well with people, especially simple people, and most of all with peasants. He had drunk more than one glass of *bimber* in the past half-hour, and was already talking to Stefan as if he were an old friend, sharing the old man's strong, homegrown tobacco, laughing loudly, joking, and calling him by the affectionate Russian nickname Stepa.

Karev, like the rest of us, had an extremely limited command of Polish—three or four dozen words. He was now trying to use them to converse with Zosia. She listened with a merry and slightly mischievous smile, laughing at his uncertain pronunciation, asking him questions from time to time, speaking very quickly in order to tease him. He would shrug his shoulders, his face expressing a comically exaggerated incomprehension.

Victor too addressed Zosia several times, through Stefan, asking all kinds of trifling questions. He obviously wanted to start up a conversation and win her attention for himself. I watched all this glumly, and decided I must certainly talk to her myself.

I even thought that I had a certain advantage. In my pocket was a *Brief Russian-Polish Phrase Book* I had just received from brigade headquarters. It would, of course, facilitate

communication with the local people. I confess I placed no small hope in that tiny book, which was about the size of an identification card.

Stealthily removing it from my pocket, I placed it on my knees and paged through it from beginning to end. There were more than thirty short sections, and it seemed that all possible situations, not only on land but also on the sea and in the air, had been foreseen. I could, for example, inquire without the slightest difficulty or hesitation about a wide variety of things: "Do you know where the rest of the German soldiers and officers are hiding?"; "Can you tell me what areas the Germans have mined in this vicinity?"; "Please show me what track the fuel cisterns are on." I could even ask: "Can the river be forded? Where? Can tanks get across?"; or "How many parachutists have landed?"; or "Where did the gliders land?"

But what did I want with this welter of interrogatives?

The section that came closest to my needs was the next to last; it was titled "Conversation on General Subjects". To my great irritation, it contained only fifteen phrases, of which the most unmilitary and human were "Hello"; "Thank you"; "What is your name?"—but I had known since morning that her name was Zosia; "Have a cigarette", (Offering her a cigarette? What a thought!); "As a patriotic Pole you must help us in the struggle against our common enemy"; and "Where is the nearest hospital (pharmacy/public baths)?"

Disheartened, I hid the book away in my pocket again.

Whether talking or listening, Stefan watched us closely with his intelligent eyes. His look was a bit wary, as if he wanted to find out what sort of people we were, how much Russians had changed in the nearly thirty years since he had served in the Tsar's army. He was probably wondering most of all what the village could expect from us.

I was slightly, pleasantly tipsy, and Zosia's friendliness had given me courage. I had begun to cast long glances towards her when, suddenly, she put me in my place; she looked directly at me, stern and cold, even a bit haughty.

I was stunned; I could not imagine any reason for such a change. What had I done? Had I been too bold?

Or was it, perhaps, just the unconscious game that the weaker half of humankind has been playing for hundreds and thousands of years with the other, stronger half? I will never know. But anyway I would have been too shy and inexperienced then to play along.

After I had spent a minute or so in total bewilderment, however, Zosia gave me another look, as friendly and spirited as earlier, and I cheered up immediately and smiled back at her.

A little while later I noticed, or thought I did, that she was glancing at me more often than at Victor or Karev, and in some special way, tenderly and expectantly—as if she wanted to talk to me about something, ask me some question, but could not summon up the courage to begin. All at once, with all my being, I felt a vague but sweet hope that she was feeling the same as I was. It was like the beginning of something new and significant, something I had never experienced before. Already I was almost sure of it: something was happening between us.

The liquor had gradually loosened our tongues and melted away the earlier awkwardness. Wanda, chuckling to herself about something, was darting glances at Victor quite openly. That was a bad mistake on her part: according to Victor it was men who should make the advances, and women should take a purely defensive position. He did not care for anything that was gotten without labour and effort.

Again, I caught Zosia giving me that mysterious, but somehow expectant look. A second later I felt what I thought was a light, uncertain touch on my knee. My heart skipped a beat, then pounded hard and fast.

I must act. At once, immediately!

"Cities are taken by bravery," I told myself, "women, by brazenness. No hanging back! Come on!" And with sudden decision I pushed my leg forward. Instantly Karev's face contorted with pain—his knee had been hit by shrapnel—and he looked under the table. He peered at me inquiringly.

My face blazed with embarrassment, but Zosia did not notice it, or at least pretended not to notice. A little later she said something to Stefan, and he turned to me smiling:

"Does the comrade pray to God?"

"No. Why?" I asked in surprise.

"Zosia says that the comrade was praying down by the river."

So that was what had interested her! And only that?

"It wasn't a prayer. Not at all..."

"It was poetry," put in Victor having guessed what Zosia had seen. He looked at me reproachfully, and added:

"You and your poetry!"

It would be wrong to say that Victor did not like poetry; he simply did not understand it.

"Nonsense!" he'd wax indignant. "Where did he ever see

a pink horse? Tell me another, I'm a country boy myself!"

Apparently Stefan did not know, or had forgotten, what the word "poetry" meant; he repeated it slowly, and shrugged.

"You know—Pushkin," I explained, in an embarrassed voice.

"Ah!" he smiled and said something to Zosia.

Victor took the opportunity to say that religion was opium and a means of repressing the working people, and that most of our people were finished with God and religion. There were some believers left here and there, of course, but they were unenlightened old people, outdated left-overs. Young people did not go in for that kind of nonsense, he said, and a girl like Zosia—he indicated her with his eyes—would be ashamed to wear a cross on a chain around her neck.

It did not seem to me he had said anything offensive, but when Stefan had translated his words something unexpected happened: hot flames leapt into Zosia's face, her cheeks crimsoned in a second, her eyes went dark, and her chestnut brows trembled, like a child's, in outrage.

I was afraid she would break down and cry, but instead she shot Victor an angry and scornful glance and with a quick energetic motion lifted the silver chain, with its Catholic crucifix, for everyone to see. She threw back her head, chin up, and thrust her bosom forward in an open challenge.

Her face, her eyes, her whole posture conveyed so much anger, pride and scorn that Victor was a little discomfited. He lowered his head like a bull about to charge and looked at me, and then at Karev, as if seeking support or calling us to witness, as if he wanted to shout, "Did you see that?"

Pani Julia said something to Zosia in a hurried, pleading voice, and Stefan murmured something to her quietly but emphatically, obviously suggesting that she hide the cross away again. But Zosia, scarlet with indignation, stared straight ahead and sat without moving, except for the fluttering of her bosom.

A tense silence descended. Victor snorted menacingly. I knew him well, and understood that it was quite impossible for him to silently ignore such a demonstration.

"By the way," came Karev's voice, "we in the Soviet Union have freedom of religion. And the government respects the feelings of believers."

He spoke to no one in particular, but clearly and loudly, as if addressing a large audience. Victor studied him from under his brows, and seemingly understood that it would not do to stand on principle here, that it would be better to retreat. At last,

mastering himself, he began to talk with Stefan about the crops.

No more than a minute later he was conversing happily with Stefan and *Pani* Julia, and even smiling. But Zosia was not so quickly placated. Karev tried in vain to distract her, to make her laugh, or even smile. She continued to sit stern and silent, disregarding Victor, or at least not looking in his direction. Quite some time passed before she softened a little and began to smile. Even then, she did not put the cross back, but let it hang over her blouse.

In the meantime Victor had boiled the *pelmeni* in a rich meat broth. Now he served them himself, and demonstrated how they should be eaten, drenching them with the sauce of vinegar and mustard he had prepared according to a special recipe. He was a remarkably good chef, and Siberian *pelmeni* were his speciality. Thus it was not surprising that *Pani* Julia and her guests, after trying the dish, complimented Victor on his culinary abilities and quickly emptied two big plates. I liked his cooking too, and probably ate several *pelmeni* myself, but I am not certain of it—I was not capable of thinking about food at the time.

I kept peeking at Zosia, but not more often, I believe, than I looked at Stefan or *Pani* Julia. Only I looked at the older people without shyness, mainly out of necessity—for camouflage—while I looked at Zosia furtively, as if by chance, in a daze of tenderness and concealed delight.

Even when I was not looking at her I felt her presence every minute. I could not think about anything else, although I tried to follow the conversation, caught isolated phrases, and even smiled if someone beside me laughed.

Something unprecedented was happening to me. Never in my life had I been so disturbed by the sight of a girl or woman, although I had fallen in love several times already—the first time when I and my “beloved” were only five or six. My most recent heartthrob, a nurse named Olya from the next battalion, had been seriously wounded at the beginning of the campaign and was now in some hospital in the rear, not in the least suspecting how I felt.

In those days, the days of my youth, I often quoted poetry, rightly thinking that a great many ideas and longings had been expressed by poets incomparably better, more vividly and clearly, than I could put things myself. And now these lines kept running through my head:

*Dear, let's sit here, side by side,
Gazing in each other's eyes!*

Oh, if only I dared say that to Zosia, if only I could find a way to say it!

The conversation continued to be mainly between Victor and Stefan. It was about farming, and full of the details peasants love, and thus often incomprehensible to Karev and me—talk about soils and ploughing, about harvests, milk yield, and feed. They spoke calmly, unhurriedly, until Stefan asked the question that had already been put to us in other villages: Would there be collective farms in Poland now too, and was it true that everyone in Poland would be sent off to Siberia?

As always in these cases Victor—his native village was in Siberia—became very angry and offended.

"You had better watch what you're saying, Stepa," he shouted. "Those words were put into your mouth! You think of Siberia as a place of exile and hard labour, don't you? Prison camps? Have you ever seen it? You did? Through the window of the train as you were passing through? I wouldn't trade my village of Mikhailovka for your whole district, for all of Europe!" His face was dark with ire. "Who put that idea into your head? The Germans? I could kill anybody who says such things, you remember that!"

Stefan, who was noticeably tipsy, was stunned by this sudden turn in the conversation, which up to now had been peaceful and friendly. He put his hand to his heart and muttered "*Przepraszam państwo*," and excused himself as best he could. The others fell silent, and Zosia looked at Victor with unconcealed hostility. I was more than a little embarrassed myself, and could find nothing to say; once again it was Karev who saved the day.

"Let's drink to Mikhailovka," he proposed cheerfully, filling Stefan's glass, "and to Nowy Dwór."

I was rather drunk already, but still I could not get up the gumption to start a conversation with Zosia, I needed more courage. To my own surprise, I took the pitcher from Karev and filled my empty beer glass with *bimber*.

Victor, who was still ruffled from the talk about collective farms and Siberia, looked at me with amazement and obvious displeasure. He started to say something, but then just snorted and kept silent.

I had never drank that much before—and this was undiluted, home-distilled spirits. I should not have done it, of course.

But I was goaded by a remark Stefan had made earlier: he said that the Germans were no match for us, that they drank in tiny glassfuls. Zosia's presence had something to do with it too: I wanted to muster the courage to talk to her. Victor's displeasure seemed to me unjust: I was no gosling, after all.

At any rate, there could be no turning back now. With a nonchalant air—as if to say “What’s so unusual about this?”—I raised my glass, smiled, and looked bravely at Stefan and *Pani* Julia. “May you live a hundred years, my friends!” I remember that *Pani* Julia gazed at me sadly and thoughtfully, resting her cheek on her palm just as my grandmother used to do.

I had heard that *bimber* was a strong drink, but had still not expected it to be so strong—it actually seemed to blister my throat! I choked on my first swallow, and tears welled up into my eyes; terrified that I would make a fool of myself in front of everybody, I made a desperate effort and managed to drink all of it. I put the glass back down and noticed everyone was looking at me. Zosia, too, was watching me intently and, it seemed, mockingly. I had a coughing fit and turned red—probably not only in the face but in my back and buttocks too.

At once I felt hot and uncomfortable, I sat sheepishly, feeling the potent liquor going to my head, spreading all through my body. I could not see anything; I did not even notice the pickled cucumber and hunk of bread Stefan thrust towards me as he sing-songed in Polish:

*My mlodzi, my mlodzi,
Nam bimber nie zaszkodzi,
Więc pijmy go szklankami,
Kto z nami, kto z nami...**

Within a few minutes I realized that I had committed an irreparable mistake—what the devil had made me drink that foul stuff? I was rapidly sinking into drunkenness; all the things around me—the table, people’s faces—were covered with a transparent veil, as if I were looking at them through a film of water.

I hauled out my phrase book again and began to page through it. Then I remembered it was useless and put it back into my pocket. My head buzzed, and I was feeling confused, but one

* *We are young, we are young,
Bimber doesn't hurt us,
So we drink it by the glassful.
Who will join us? Who will join us?*

thought haunted me; I must try starting a conversation with Zosia, I must at any cost!

I was still capable of realizing that she would not understand me; I turned to Stefan and took him firmly by the hand, to get his attention.

"Please translate for me," I said urgently.

Then I banged my fist on the table, and addressed everybody in a loud voice: "Just one minute, please!" To make my words more impressive I stared into Stefan's face and squeezed his hand. I declaimed, no doubt far too loudly:

*Dear, let's sit here, side by side.
Gazing in each other's eyes!
As you watch me, starry-eyed,
I can feel love's tempest rise.**

Stefan had not even opened his mouth—he was gaping at me, smiling in incomprehension—when Semyonov laughed deafeningly on my left. Someone else was laughing too.

"You milksop," I heard Victor's hiss in my ear. "You don't know how to drink. You're a disgrace to your uniform and to your country. Want me to help you outside?"

"No-o-oo!" I declared loudly and resolutely, swinging my head.

It seemed to me now that there was nothing I could not do. I looked at Zosia, but I could not see her clearly: her face doubled, swam, dissolved. I felt hot and ill; a minute later I felt I was going to be sick.

I got up, struggling to keep my balance. Swaying and stumbling against something, I moved towards the door. Karev caught up with me in the entry-way and led me out onto the porch. But I did not want his help; I got away from him and pushed him back.

"Let me show you the way."

"No-o-oo!" I shouted angrily. "I c'n manage."

And he went obediently away.

I stood on the porch, breathing in the fresh air with relief. I was at odds with everyone and everything. "The hell with it," I finally decided. I took a step forward and went flying down the steps, hitting my face hard against something.

Then I found myself around the back, by the hay barn, and

* Translated by Dorian Rottenberg.

Semyonov—it was he—was holding me by the arm and saying scornfully:

“You jackass, you’ve skinned your mug all up!”

He bent my head down and stuck his fingers into my throat. When I had vomited he wiped his hand on the top of his boot and admonished me:

“You ought to stick to soda water. But not more than one glass, or you’ll wet your pants.”

* * *

When I came to it was late evening; I was lying in the stuffy barn on a bunch of hay. The left half of the door was open. A silent, tender moon hung low over the garden, directly in front of me; farther off dozens of stars, scattered around the sky, sparkled and flickered.

Beside me, almost touching me with their tails, three or four dogs were squealing as they played and romped about, taking not the slightest notice of me. There was a vile taste in my mouth, my head was splitting; my arms, neck, face—even my body under my tunic and trousers—were itching and burning hellishly: I had been bitten all over by fleas.

The late song of a solitary nightingale could be heard from far off; from somewhere near the house came the sound of Victor’s guitar, of feet shuffling, merry voices, and laughter.

To tell the truth, Victor was not a good player. As a rule he confined himself to a rather primitive and almost unchanging accompaniment, which he explained by pointing out that the guitar was six-stringed, while he was used to the Russian instrument—with seven. His singing was not marked by any special talent either. But he was my friend and so his performance pleased me.

Right now he wasn’t singing, but strumming something rather like a waltz; and people were dancing over there by the house. Zosia was probably among them; why shouldn’t she be? No doubt they were having a good time; and of course she was, too. Well, good for her.

No regret I feel, no pain, no sorrow...

I told myself.

Blossom blows away, a song is sung...

I lay there, listening to the laughter, the shuffling of feet, and the voices. I suffered—and not only my soul: the relentless

fleas scourged me with their fiery bites.

A bit later Karev came into the hay barn, limping a little, stepping uncertainly. He looked around with a lamp. Seeing me, he said:

"You're not asleep? Let's go out into the air. This place is crawling with fleas. Aren't they biting you?"

I had been bitten pitilessly all over, but I was still feeling sulky and stubborn.

"No," I said stubbornly. My head throbbed. "I'm not going anywhere."

The usually taciturn Karev became loquacious after a drink or two. Now, lifting his greatcoat from the hay and shaking it, he continued:

"What a fine fellow our battalion commander is, if you think about it! He may be simple, but what a magnificent specimen! It's a great thing—the attraction of strength. You've noticed how everyone looks at him with delight, with love?"

"Everybody?"

"Word of honour—young and old alike. He's already kissed Stefan twice... He's a fine fellow, and a real rakehell," exclaimed Karev in delight. "No denying it. He's had more than a litre of *himber*, not counting the other things, but to look at him you'd think he'd never touched a drop, he's sober as a judge. But I'm nearly under the table. And you know, he's right: the women go for the strong, determined ones. The ones with brazen self-confidence, who blaze their way through all obstacles. You and me, we're too intellectual by half to win their attention... Useless chivalry." He sighed thoughtfully and disappointedly. "Damn it to hell. You see—with women you need combat tactics," he waved his fist, "drive bordering on brazenness..."

Of course I could have told him that my father came from a long line of factory workers, that my mother operated a loom, that I myself had gone to war from the school bench, and hadn't had time to become an intellectual, so that apparently the problem lay elsewhere. But I did not want to talk. I only brought out, pronouncing the words slowly and with difficulty:

"I don't make it my goal to win anybody's attention. Especially women's. I am not in the least concerned about that..."

I woke at dawn with a heavy head, bitter and ashamed about the preceding evening, about my drunkenness and my foolish, puerile behaviour. I got up feeling low and when, as I washed up by the truck, I looked into the mirror and saw purple bruises on my nose and cheek-bone, I felt utterly depressed. But I had not time for remorse—I set myself to work without even having breakfast.

By the time Victor got up I had already finished the reports on measures for camouflage, and for protection against air and chemical attack; I gave them to him to sign and sent them off to the brigade headquarters by motorcycle.

The three of us, Victor, Karev, and I, had breakfast beside the truck. They avoided the subject of the preceding day, and pretended not to notice my facial defects. Instead they discussed plans for working with the men on the regulations and tactics, and asked my opinion too.

After they had left I made up, with some difficulty, yet another urgent report, and then started in on the death notices.

I was faced with the task of filling out two hundred and three identical forms, writing on each the name and address of one of the dead man's relations, and also his rank, last name, first name, and patronymic, his year and place of birth, the date of his death, and the place he was buried.

Before me lay the model sent from headquarters; it was executed in a fine, calligraphic hand. I had all the necessary information too, and as I set to work it ran through my mind that this was a simple, mechanical job, incomparably easier than making up reports and documents that I had no idea about. How wrong I was!

I knew personally many of those who had been killed: some of them were my comrades; two of them—my friends. As I began to write I became completely immersed in memories; it was as if I travelled a second time over the eight hundred kilometres our battalion had covered in the month-long offensive, took part once again in the battles, witnessed scores of deaths all over again.

Once again before my eyes the soldiers of Lieutenant Abbasov's group were drowning in the swift, cold water of the Niemen. Abbasov was a lively, light-hearted fellow from Baku; two hours later, when we had already gained a foothold on the opposite shore, he was crushed by a German tank.

Once again I heard the screams of Kolya Bragin, my orderly—an affable village lad, the only provider for his paralysed mother,—as he lay bleeding to death on a mine field with his legs torn off.

Once again I saw Lieutenant Lomakin, a wise older man, a mechanical engineer in peace time, who had been our battalion's Party organiser, as he ran panting through the wasteland on the outskirts of Mogilyov, leading the rest of the men. He fell right at the edge of the field, cut down by a round of machine-gun fire.

And once again my favourite—our best soldier—Misha Sayenko from Vladivostok, burned by a stream from a flame-thrower, was writhing in awful, inhuman pain.

And a Battery Commander Savinov, a man old enough, almost, to be my grandfather, a mathematics teacher from somewhere near Smolensk, endowed with a great warmth of heart, lay at the bottom of a trench with his belly torn up by a mine splinter, calling out in a mechanical, barely audible and ever weakening voice. "Mamma, Mamma, Mamma..."

And again... Once more... And still again...

All of these men, and dozens of others among the dead, were not strangers, but people I had known well and been close to. As I filled out the notices, I looked into the personnel files, examined their documents if any were left. Often I would learn something new about a dead man, perhaps something unexpected, and he would appear before my eyes as if alive. Again I heard their voices and laughter, which had rung out so recently; once again I mourned their deaths.

So far they were lost only to us in the battalion. But almost every one of them had mothers and fathers, wives and children; they had relatives and, undoubtedly, friends. Somewhere in cities and in villages people were thinking about them, worrying about them, waiting for and rejoicing in every word from them. And tomorrow the field post would carry these notices off to every part of the country, bringing grief and weeping, desolation and deprivation into hundreds of families, making dozens of children orphans.

It was terrible to think how many hopes and expectations would be crushed in a single blow by these little gray sheets of paper with the same standard formula: "Faithful to his military duty died a hero's death in battle for our socialist Motherland..." It was terrifying even to imagine it—but what could I do?

As soon as I started on the death notices I took a dislike

to the official form of address, "Citizen..." The third or fourth form I made out was addressed to the Kostroma district, to the mother of my friend Seryozha Zashchipin, Evdokia Vassilievna, who worked as a medic in some village, a wonderful, warm-hearted woman. I knew her: she had visited us twice during our training, and treated us to a pre-war delicacy, home-baked honey cookies. She had invited me again and again to come and visit her after the war, in her village on the Volga. I felt that I should not, could not, address her merely as "Citizen." "Comrade...", "Dear..."? I set trying to decide, remembered Yesenin for some reason and, after some hesitation, wrote "Dear Evdokia Vassilievna."

Time was passing, and there was no one I could consult. At my own risk I started to write "Dear" together with the full name and patronymic on each of the notices.

On the line "place of burial" I had to write again and again "on the battlefield". These words, too, troubled me.

I remembered how, in the thaw of the first spring of the war, my mother, refusing to listen to anyone who tried to reason with her, set off on foot on a trip of almost two hundred kilometres to look for the grave of Alyosha, my elder brother, who was killed somewhere near Vyazma. Two weeks later she returned, without having found anything after all; she was worn out, ill. Her legs were completely ruined, and she had grown many years older all at once.

I did not doubt that many of those I was addressing "Dear", would want—if not at present, then after the war—to seek out the graves. But in the course of our advance we left the dead for the burial crews of rifle divisions, and so, unfortunately, I did not know the precise place of burial.

After much thought the only other thing I hit upon was to write on every one of those two hundred and three notices, before the words "Your son (husband/father/brother...)" the following words. "We regret to inform you that..."

This also, of course, was a departure from the model; but I decided that this small irregularity of mine softened the official dryness of the notices and was thus welcome, even necessary. If they turned down my work at headquarters I would write them all over again—the battalion had about two thousand more forms.

Around ten in the morning two men from headquarters came to check on the battalion; the head of the combat division, a taciturn and unsmilingly strict captain, rather advanced in

years, and a middle-aged but lively senior lieutenant from the political department. While still in the street, he pulled from the car a bundle of newspapers and pamphlets and shouted joyfully that our forces had taken the cities of Narva and Demblin by storm.

Narva was somewhere way off to the north-east, near Lenin-grad, and Demblin was somewhere south of Białystok. Neither place was nearby. I had never been in either, and at that moment the cities taken in battle seemed to me—no doubt from my purely clerical point of view—to be nothing but many piles of death notices.

I rose and made my report, thinking with displeasure that now they would take up a good deal of my time; but, luckily, they left right away for the units.

I spent not less than six hours on the death notices. I could never have even imagined how broken and empty I would feel as the stack of completed notices grew before me. I went on writing, filled with mournful thoughts and memories, and envying Victor and Karev who knew nothing of my sufferings, they were busy drilling the men. From where they were, beyond the village, I could hear the words of a brisk marching song.

The day, like the previous one, was gloriously sunny, but not blazing, and there was such a marvellous smell of apples and honey. As on the previous day too, Zosia had been busy since the morning with various light chores around the house and the garden, *Pani* Julia trying to check her enthusiasm more than once and doing as much as possible herself. I had already noticed how tenderly she was guarding Zosia, as a beloved child. This one daughter was all that she had now; her son and husband had died fighting the Germans back in the autumn of 1939.

Hurrying through the garden that morning, Zosia tossed me a "*Dzień dobry*", I mumbled an embarrassed "Good day" after her. I had specially placed my table so that a big, heavily-laden apple branch hung right over my forehead, hiding my bruised face somewhat.

During the day she walked or ran past me many times, humming some gay, playful melody to herself, now carrying water in a little bucket—to the barrels in the garden, now with a hoe or some other thing in her hands.

Immersed in the death notices, I did not watch her as I had done the day before; I hardly lifted my eyes at all, and if I caught a glimpse of her it was only by chance, not intentionally. To fall

prey to distraction, to pay attention to her rather than my task, seemed to me that morning almost a blasphemous disrespect to the memory of those who had died in battle. I was sure that if she had known what I was doing, what those grayish papers were about, she would not have hummed so joyfully, would not have flitted back and forth like that.

About two o'clock that afternoon, when I had written out the last death notice, I sent a sentry to the fifth company, telling him to get his lunch there and bring me my meal from the battalion mess. When he was gone I started on a report, but then decided to allow myself a short break and got out my book from my map case.

I looked around me: there was no one in the orchard or the yard. I began to read, and immediately was swept up. Getting up from the table, I recited with delight the poems I liked best, mostly from memory, hardly looking at the text.

Although carried away with the poetry, I was watching the house so as to notice the returning soldier in time. Happily, he was not in sight and there was no one to disturb me.

*Let the dark-blue twilight sometimes whisper,
You were nothing but a song and dream;
The designer of your waist and shoulders
Must have known a secret most supreme.*

*Not to roam, to break through crimson bushes...**

I heard a rustling and turned around rapidly. Zosia was standing just ten paces from me.

I don't know what she could have felt without knowing the language, but her face was concentrated, full of deep feeling; her eyes, opened wide, looked at me searchingly. Perhaps she was caught up by the poignant melody, by the music of Yesenin's verses. Or maybe she was straining to guess what they were about—I cannot say.

I broke off abruptly, blushed scarlet, and, remembering about my face, turned away hastily. But I clearly heard her say in a quiet voice, "More." The word sounds the same in Russian and Polish.

I was at a loss. Luckily the soldier appeared at that minute with two steaming mess-tins. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Zosia take a small sickle, which glittered in the sun.

* Translated by Dorian Rottenberg.

She went off between the apple trees, walking slowly, haughtily, and with a tinge of displeasure. When she had disappeared into the back of the orchard I began to eat, the open volume before me. In another fifteen minutes or so I was making out yet another report.

Victor and Karev soon returned. They were very cheerful—the inspectors from headquarters had been satisfied with our battalion. The political-department man told Victor they had expected worse: the brigade commander had ordered them to look in on us almost every other day, to check and help.

At my request Victor, sitting at the edge of the table, put his signature to all the death notices; spending maybe half an hour on the task. As he did this he neither sighed, nor paused to reflect, nor said a single word. Yet I could say that he was suffering in his own way. He bent his head and knit his brows, breathing loud through his nose. Now and then, evidently when he came across the names of people he had known well, he would wince, as if from a sour taste or a pain, and would scratch fiercely at the back of his neck.

When he had finished, he rose, without breaking his silence, and washed up beside the truck. When he was drying himself he called me to lunch *Pani* Julia had prepared for us. I did not want to go. Thanking him, I pointed to the empty mess-tins under the apple tree. He did not insist and went off towards the house with Karev.

5

After lunch Victor, who had heard there was a pile of firewood in the forest which had been prepared while the Germans were still in the village, offered to bring some in for *Pani* Julia and Stefan, a truckload each.

This was like him.

"We are more than just soldiers; we are liberators," he would tell the men proudly. "Who are we liberating? Those who have nothing. We must help them in any way we can. We are not to take, but to give."

He was convinced of this, and wherever we were stationed he willingly helped the inhabitants in his free moments: chopped firewood for them, dug over their gardens for them, made shelters for those whose homes had been burnt down, or even managed to put together stoves from old, broken bricks. I have

no doubt that in later days these people often remembered him with gratitude.

He also loved to fill the truck with children and let them ride to their hearts' content—the shouts, the squeals, the joy! He considered this a matter of almost the highest importance, although our late battalion commander did not approve of what he called this “expenditure of gasoline not occasioned by necessity”, and had repeatedly said so to Victor.

At Victor's orders Semyonov brought the Studebaker around from the mortar battery. I saw and heard Victor, standing in the yard beside the truck, asking Stefan about the road. The old man tried to talk him out of going: he said the woods thereabouts were literally teeming with Germans trying to break out of encirclement and get back across the front line. Three days earlier they had butchered a Polish family at a nearby farm, and the day before, in the very forest where Victor intended to go, they had ambushed our ambulance bus, killing the driver and the medic, and burning the bus together with the wounded in it.

Pani Julia, too, begged Victor not to go, Zosia, hurrying up behind her, threatened him with her little fist and said something quickly and angrily to her mother and Stefan—I understood she was demanding that they forbid Victor to go.

But all these pleas only egged Victor on. Laughing away their protests, he ordered Semyonov to bring two submachine guns, spare rounds for them, and six grenades. He checked the guns casually, took the wheel—Semyonov sat beside him—and drove out of the yard. At the very last moment Stefan, maddened by his stubbornness, and cursing heartily in Polish and in Russian—mentioning the plague, the devil, and Victor's parents—hopped into the back of the Studebaker.

I sat under the apple tree, writing, but in my thoughts I was in the forest with Victor. I very much wanted to go with him, and wished they really would ambush us: then I could have showed my worth. I daydreamed of our return to the village, myself seriously and dangerously wounded, the truck-bed filled with a load of dead Germans, killed by me. Zosia and *Pani* Julia running to meet us: Stefan and Victor vying with one another tell how, if it were not for me, not one of us would have got away alive.

It was absurd, to dream of such a thing. And why should we take enemy corpses out of the forest? But I remember that I really did wish it, vehemently. So that Zosia—and not only

she—could see that I was not just a pen-pusher, not some milk-sop with a scratched nose who slaved away at papers and read poetry, but a man and a soldier. She had seen the medals on my tunic, of course, but they got medals in headquarters too—sometimes they were even given to pen-pushers—and so I wanted very much to demonstrate my valour in deeds.

I became so lost in dreams that I spoiled my report on the battalion's engineering equipment and had to do it over.

Victor, Semyonov, and Stefan came back an hour and a half later, very pleased with themselves. The truck was loaded high with first-rate birch firewood. *Pani* Julia melted into smiles, at the sight of them, but Zosia remained indignant. As Stefan explained to Victor, she did not want wood that might have caused someone's death, and declared that she and her mother could get along without it. She protested with such vigour that *Pani* Julia quickly gave in and asked Victor to take the wood to Stefan's yard.

For once Victor did not even try to insist. The Studebaker turned round immediately and drove away. *Pani* Julia and Zosia also went off somewhere and I was left with those cursed papers again. Despite all my efforts they did not seem to have grown any less; I wanted so much to get through them at last, and with a clear conscience write a letter to my mother.

I worked without stopping. Meanwhile Victor had brought a second load of wood; making use of the absence of Zosia and *Pani* Julia, Semyonov, Stefan and he hurriedly unloaded it and, quick as a flash, stacked it beside the barn.

I remember it was time to change the sentry in the orchard and as soon as Semyonov was free I put him at the post. Meanwhile Stefan had been called away—relatives had come to visit. Before he left he thanked Victor again and invited him to come and drink a bottle of *bimber* with him and his brother-in-law. Victor promised to come a little later.

Before returning the Studebaker he sat down on the running-board for a smoke, staring meditatively at the neat wood pile. An old woman in poor clothing, pitiful and dirty, approached and addressed him in a plaintive voice. "*Nic niema*,"* she kept repeating, pointing to the wood pile, and then across the street at a broken-down little house where she obviously lived.

"Tomorrow, tomorrow," said Victor, understanding at once. "I promise."

* I have nothing. (*Polish*)—Tr.

I had no doubt that he would bring wood for her the next day, but she did not understand, and kept crying, beating her bony hand on her breast and stubbornly repeating "*nic niema*".

"Damned old hag, I hope you split in two," he said angrily, but got up; he couldn't stand tears. He made a savage face, and looked towards me as if seeking sympathy. "There is no shaking her off."

Taking a last draw, he put out the cigarette with his heel and grabbed the door of the cab.

I sensed that he had decided to go right now, alone. The sun was setting already, and it was surely getting dark in the forest; the danger of attack was much greater now. Hurriedly collecting my papers, I locked them in a metal box, grabbed my sub-machine gun out of the Dodge, and hurried into the yard.

"Where are you going?" asked Victor in surprise, leaning out of the cab. "For firewood? You go ahead and finish with the papers," he ordered. "I won't be a minute."

He put the truck in gear and tore out of the yard. I stood a little while looking after him, thinking again that I should have shown determination, should not let him go alone. Then I went back into the orchard.

I was now physically unable to write any more. My hand had gone numb; no matter how I strained my eyes I had trouble making out the letters and lines in the half-light under the apple tree; my head was splitting, and I could not understand anything. And then my eye fell on Semyonov. Evidently unhappy that I had assigned him to sentry duty for the whole evening, and confident of my soft-heartedness and his own impunity, he had gathered apples in the hem of his tunic and, sprawled on the seat of the Dodge, was demonstratively champing away and looking at me defiantly.

I walked out of the village. At once, thoughts of Zosia took hold of me, and try as I might I could not get rid of them.

Really, what did I want with this Zosia?

And when you came to it, who was she and what was so special about her? Just a perfectly ordinary girl. There would be any number of them in my life—if, of course, I went on living. And no doubt some of them would be better, and prettier.

What, after all, could I—a Komsomol member, and a convinced atheist, have in common with some Catholic girl? What? To call a spade a spade, she was a religious fanatic, no more. And no doubt a rabid nationalist.

*A prince am I. It is a shame for me
To bow before a haughty Polish woman...**

All very correct and logical; but alas, only in theory. In vain I struggled to think about something else, to find something ugly in her, to convince myself of the devil only knows what sort of things about her.

I walked and walked through the fields, not thinking where or why, and only came to myself at the edge of a big forest, which loomed darkly in the gathering dusk. I stopped and looked around, trying to think where I might be.

Finally I noticed the fresh, ribbed tracks of the Studebaker in the sandy road.

This was evidently the same forest to which Victor had gone for firewood. Now I understood. I had heard Stefan answering Victor's questions about how to get to where the firewood lay ready. I had remembered his words, and now, concerned about Victor, had gone by the same road without even thinking.

There was a strong smell of pine in the forest; it was dark, stuffy, and gloomy. I had probably not gone in farther than five hundred metres when I saw something very big and black; I did not realize at once that it was the ambulance bus the Germans had burned.

I went up to it, I did not look inside—in the past year and a half I had seen more than enough corpses. I squatted down on my heels and, with some difficulty, made out the tracks of the Studebaker. Then I went on.

I do not remember precisely whether I felt fear in that sinister, hostile forest; but I could not help being concerned. If anything happened to Victor I would never have been able to forgive myself for having let him go alone.

I was well into the forest when at last I heard somewhere in front of me the noise of a motor; when I was sure it was coming my way I hid in the trees.

Two minutes later the Studebaker passed me, loaded with firewood, its darkened headlamps gleaming faintly. Victor sat at the wheel peering into the semi-darkness.

It did not occur to me to call to him. It was only that I wanted, and considered it my duty, to be at his side if anything happened. But I had no doubt that if he were to see me now, if he found out or guessed that what had brought me here was concern for

* Translated by Dorian Rottenberg.

his safety, he would have laughed, and probably said good-naturedly, but without hiding his scorn, something like: "Poppycock, and also rotten sentimentalism."

He would probably have given me a good dressing-down too: I was completely unarmed—after all, when I left I had no idea I would end up in the forest. I had not even taken my pistol.

He went past me, towards the village, and a little later I came out onto the road and followed slowly, past the burned bus, to the edge of the woods.

I remember I did not even feel especially glad when the trees at last ended and the fields of rye suddenly surrounded me. What good did this evening hold in store for me? What awaited me in the village?

The rye rustled mournfully as if in sympathy; and the grasshoppers kept up an unbroken, weary monotone.

I came to the edge of the village. It was now completely dark, and the first stars were beginning to shine bright. The moon had lost its initial yellowness and turned silver.

In its ghostly light a crucified Christ suffered on a high wooden cross; I must confess that I was suffering too—I was sad and lonely.

As I approached the house I heard a guitar—Victor was playing. Of course he had already unloaded the wood, returned the Studebaker, changed clothes, had supper, and was now relaxing. Being a man of action, he had quickly and decisively done the job, while I had spent the same time pining and suffering, like some wilting flower, uselessly.

They had apparently gathered by Pani Julia's house as they had the day before, to dance and make merry. Well, let them... I would not join them. Let Zosia—and not only her—think that all that did not interest me in the least, that I had better things to occupy me than their silly dancing, emotions, and courting.

Victor, accompanying himself on the guitar, sang with feeling:

Turning over these faded old photos,

A belated tear I will shed

On a snowy-pinafores schoolgirl

With her hair in a heavy braid.

As I recollect this, it seems absurd and unrealistic that Victor, who was a courageous, strong, stout-hearted fellow, and could not stand any kind of sentimentality, could when in the mood, sing that sort of tender nonsense. Absurd and unrealistic, but that's the way it was.

*Maybe now you're already a lady
And a schoolboy with tousled hair—
Goodness gracious!—calls you his Mummy,
You, my schoolgirl with braid so fair.**

Well, let them, I stood gloomily beside the cross; I did not want to go into the village, to meet or talk with anybody. I didn't know what I should do now. Where could I go, what could I do until bedtime?

From the nearby houses came the smell of living and the appetizing aroma of freshly-baked bread. I felt rather hungry, and thought with a pang that probably no one was wondering whether I had gotten any supper.

After standing a while longer, I went quietly through the back alleyways to where the battalion kitchen stood, beside Stefan's porch.

From behind the windows, which had been hung with black-out, Russian—and more seldom Polish—phrases could be heard. But there was no one in the yard beside the two-wheeled trailers with the field kettles. Reluctant to call the cook—I could hear his voice coming from the house—I lifted the lid of one of the kettles and discovered dark, warm tea. In the other were the remains of a stew, which smelled wonderfully of meat and smoke.

I looked around but could not find a dipper, or a spoon, or a mess-tin. I took a small spade, washed it with water from a barrel, and carefully, so as not to soil my clothes, bent over the kettle and dipped out an enormous serving of the thick buckwheat porridge.

It was not quite cold, and amazingly good, with plenty of captured lard, tinned pork, and fried onions. I sat down on a log beside the trailer. Using a wood chip for a spoon, I began to eat with great appetite. Only now did I realize how hungry I was.

They were drinking inside, and fairly far gone. Besides the cook—Zyuzin, a stolid elderly lance-corporal, whom everyone in the battalion called by his patronymic—Fomich—I recognized the voices of Stefan and Sidiyakin, a prickly young gunner from the fifth company. There was someone else too—Stefan's brother-in-law, who spoke little, and only in Polish.

Stefan kept asking about the collective farms, and Fomich, with tipsy assurance, drawling his words, answered.

* Translated by Dorian Rottenberg.

"It's all ri-ight—don't you fret."

But Sidiyakin, citing his own village as an example, blasted the collective farms to kingdom come and advised Stefan to take a wage job in the city if collectivization were to begin.

"Don't you fret," reassured Fomich in a singsong, contradicting Sidiyakin imperturbably. "You'll do all ri-ight."

Their conversation had distracted me, and I would probably have sat a while longer listening, but I felt as if I were eavesdropping. And so, when I had eaten all the porridge I had scooped up in the spade, I drank some water, and went out through the back yards unnoticed by anyone.

Meanwhile Victor's singing had given way to music from an accordion. Zelenko, the battalion favourite, was playing. He had a rare talent, and real virtuosity. Whatever he performed—a Ukrainian folksong or an oldtime waltz, a jaunty dance or march tune—you could only be amazed at how his battered old instrument with its three rows of buttons, its punctured and patched bellows, could produce such pure, melodic, and heart-rending sounds.

The tasty, filling porridge had fortified me physically, and morally too. I felt more alert, and rather more self-assured. Zelenko played, and I was inexorably drawn to the sound. Quietly and slowly I moved through the back ways towards Pany Julia's house, where they were dancing to the accordion.

A little later I was standing in a nettle patch behind the barn, listening to the laughter and the voices. The accordion was calling me—calling, encouraging and exciting me—and gradually I inclined to the idea that I should go and ask Zosia to dance.

And really, why shouldn't I do it? Wasn't I as good as any of them?

I tried to see myself as others did, to judge myself sternly, but objectively.

I wasn't puny; I was agile enough, and could dance at least as well as Victor and Karev. Of course the bruises on my face were no ornament, but in the long run it was not so important: I could ignore such trifles.

Maybe I didn't have a head for drink, and I was no leader of men; I was not forceful enough in addressing subordinates—but I was not a dishrag or a shirker—I had been in combat for more than a year and a half, had been wounded and decorated, and was a better shot than many. And, if official reports and the front-line newspaper were to be believed, I had more

dead Germans to my credit than anyone else in the battalion.

"Cities are captured by courage," I told myself as I walked up and down behind the barn. "Damn chivalry! I'll never get anywhere by hanging back. Assault tactics are the main thing. Insistence bordering on brazenness."

And I repeated to myself over and over again Victor's favourite maxim: Life is like a bull: take it by the horns, not grab it by the tail.

Soon I had talked myself into throwing aside all hesitation. I could already clearly picture how I would go up to Zosia and—no matter who she was standing with—ask her to dance. I would invite her not with a polite inclination of the head, but like a real man—imperatively, strongly, taking her rather roughly by the hand. I thought that if someone were at her side—in my way—I would push him aside with my shoulder, as if by accident, in passing, as I had seen Victor push an artillery lieutenant at a dance in a village outside Mogilyov.

Overflowing with determination, I paced up and down restlessly. Nothing and nobody could stop me now—I would blaze right through, just like that!

With my whole torso I swept aside an imaginary rival and grasped Zosia's hand with such force that it even occurred to me that I was in danger of overdoing it. She was young and tender, after all, and if I were to grab her that way, she might cry out from pain or get angry, like yesterday at lunch, when Victor, without laying a finger on her, had just indicated her cross with a glance.

I finally got myself so worked up that I simply could not remain inactive any longer.

It would not have been appropriate to appear from the back way. And it wouldn't hurt to brush the dust off my boots first, either. I went over to the truck.

The sentry—Semyonov—was half lying on the hay in the truck, lazily humming to himself. When I approached he squinted at me, but did not even get up.

"Get up!" I ordered not loudly, but firmly. Seeing that he did not stir, I grabbed him by the shoulder and shouted in a voice of iron, "Get up!"

He gaped at me and stood up in the truck-bed. (If he had tarried two or three seconds longer I would surely have thrown him out of the truck.) He was about to say something, but I cut him off fiercely without letting him open his mouth:

"Silence! Are you on sentry duty or at your mother-in-law's

for pancakes? You've become completely shameless. If I see this sort of thing again I'll have you peeling potatoes in the mess for a month!" I shot my hand to my cap. "Carry on!"

I had never spoken to him like that before, and understandably he was a little stunned by my vehemence. He climbed out of the truck obediently, hung his submachine gun across his chest, and went off into the apple trees rubbing his shoulder and mumbling discontentedly.

In fact, I had no intention of calling him to account; I simply needed to get a cloth from Victor's sack, on which it seemed to me he was lying.

Not paying him any more attention, I removed the dust from my boots. I gave them a generous coating with wartime shoe-polish—black, stinking stuff—and vigorously rubbed them to high gloss with the rag as I had seen Victor do.

I pulled my belt in another two notches, tugged at my tunic carefully, straightened my epaulettes and cap, and squeezed through a gap in the fence out into the street.

I intended to enter the yard with a certain breezy carelessness. But first, in order to get a quick idea of the situation, I stopped at the gate behind a tree.

On the little square in front of the porch about twenty people were dancing in pairs by the radiant light of the moon. Most of them were soldiers and sergeants from the battalion; some of them were dancing as "ladies". There were only three or four women, and I caught sight of Zosia right away.

She was dancing with Victor, her hand resting trustfully on his shoulder. He was holding her, saying something to her as they waltzed. I don't know if she understood a word of it, but she was smiling, even laughing. I looked more intently and saw with amazement, and a sinking feeling, the genuinely delighted expression on her face, which showed pale in the silvery moonlight.

There could be no doubt that she was feeling happy. She was having a good time without me!

I went back behind the house and lay down in the hay in the Dodge, trying to get a grip on myself, and to calm and collect my thoughts.

I was depressed, inexpressibly depressed, and my head ached.

No regret I feel, no pain, no sorrow...

No, that's not true. It's not like that, not like that at all.

*Horossan has one such door, they tell me,
On the threshold roses line the floor,
And a pensive peri there is dwelling,
Horossan has one such door, they tell me,
But it did not yield to me, that door.**

"I couldn't do it!" I thought to myself. I lay on my back, my eyes wide open. Countless stars twinkled brightly in the dark, deep sky. They winked playfully, as if teasing me. Only the stars and the moon know how many lovers there are in the world, and how many among them are unhappy. The moon, of course, has more tact and kindness. But the stars...

But maybe they weren't teasing at all? Maybe they were cheering me on: "Don't be shy. Cities are taken by bravery. Go on! Courage!" Perhaps. I don't know. But Zosia's face had told me more than any hopes, encouragements, or reasoning. It was easier to read and incomparably more convincing than any other argument.

I could not sleep for a long time. Semyonov, with his sub-machine gun at the ready, walked steadily back and forth, as a sentry should, through the orchard. Deep down I even regretted that I had been so sharp with him. Maybe now I should say something good to him, something approving. But I could not bring myself to begin. I felt ashamed: he had seen my energetic preparations, and my speedy return.

I lay there, feeling deeply unhappy and cheated. On the other side of the house they danced to the rollicking tunes of the accordion. Now and then there was laughter, or a merry exclamation. It even seemed to me that I could make out Zosia's voice among them, sonorous and joyful.

She was having a good enough time without me. I was horrified, tormented by the thought that she was not even thinking of me, did not even remember me; that in a few weeks we would move off, and she would stay behind, live the life that no doubt someone else would make for her; and I—whether I was killed or survived—would in any case disappear forever from her memory, like dozens of other strangers, people to whom she was indifferent.

I thought about the injustice, the cruelty of fate. And the more I thought the more the feeling of hurt and self-pity overpowered me.

* Translated by Peter Tempest.

I was awakened after midnight by a loud conversation. Victor and Semyonov stood beside the truck, in the moonlight. Victor, to my amazement, was drunk.

"Comrade Senior Lieutenant, I will bring a blanket from the house," said Semyonov uncertainly, holding him by the arm "and a pillow."

"Forget that... I don't want a nursemaid. You talk too much, Semyonov. You don't understand elementary truths," mumbled Victor angrily, getting into the truck with the help of the orderly. "Idleness ruins armies. And no drinking, no women..."

6

The next evening we left Nowy Dwór.

Just before supper we got a completely unexpected order: by morning we were to be east of Brest, in the area of Kobrin station, where reinforcements and equipment for our brigade had already arrived.

At almost the same moment the order arrived, the brigade commander came round to us in an armoured car.

"Five days for orientation, for working out smooth coordination in action. Then—into battle," he announced in a buoyant voice. "They're waiting for us on the Vistula," he hugged me—around the shoulder, and Victor too—with his artificial arm. He said it proudly and significantly, as if without our little unit it would be impossible to force the Vistula or to continue the war at all. "The good things are best taken in little doses, boys. We've had a little rest—now to work..."

Yes, he was right. The offensive continued, the front needed reinforcements. Somewhere up above, probably in the Stavka* they had changed their minds; the month and a half or two of rest had turned out to be a mere three days. Quite correct, but it came on unexpectedly. I hadn't even had time to write to my mother. And what sort of a rest was it, really? I had been slaving away at my paper work from dawn to dusk.

We got ready in half an hour.

Victor, a map spread on his lap, sat in the head Dodge beside the driver, sullen and silent. He had been gloomy all day,

* General Headquarters of the Soviet High Command.—Tr.

droning his most rousing military melodies. That morning he had drilled the men for several hours. He was fussy, demanding, and threatening.

At lunch I learned from Karev that the previous evening, when Victor had started to get fresh with Zosia after the dances, she had broken away from him abruptly and smashed his guitar over his head—that fine concert guitar, the handiwork of the famous Viennese master Leopold Schenk.

"She gave him quite a clout," Karev told me, not without relish, "smashed it to smithereens."

From shame or disappointment, discouragement and hurt pride Victor had got drunk around midnight.

This was news to me, of course, but the fact that she had struck him did not especially surprised when I heard that. The girl had character, a sort of wild pride and independence—I had felt it the very first day.

The peasants saw us off. *Pani* Julia, Stefan, and one or two others came up to our truck. The other trucks also were surrounded by people wanting to say good-bye, or who were simply curious. Zosia was nowhere to be seen.

Pani Julia brought a big bouquet of flowers and a jug of sour-cream. Victor took the bouquet and muttered something, then tossed it into the truck and once again buried himself in the map; he had not even smiled as he took the flowers. Stefan dragged up two heavy baskets loaded with apples and choice cucumbers and, with a salty soldier's comment, dumped them all out onto the hay in the back of the truck. He turned to Victor and said something, but receiving no answer fell silent. He took out a neatly folded newspaper, tore off an even square, and began to roll himself a cigarette.

A few latecomers hurried up and clambered into the trucks. I was seeing to the loading, instructing the sergeants and drivers; worried that I might let something slip, I repeated over and over again the orders necessary for military security during the march.

In something like seven hours we were to cover nearly two hundred kilometres travelling at night along back roads with headlights darkened, guided mainly by the stars. Brigade headquarters had warned us that the woods were full of German stragglers making their way west in isolated groups; anywhere along our route we might be attacked in the dark. Security demanded that the brigade move only by night, and in three battalions—three truck caravans travelling separate roads.

With a gloomy, concentrated face Victor examined the map. *Pani* Julia stood nearby, sighing every now and then. Victor had been kind to her, but her eyes held more than gratitude—they showed sorrow, compassion, even love. It was as if she were parting forever with a person very near and dear to her.

Victor had entrusted the loading entirely to me. He did not interfere, or even say a single word. Now the time set down in the orders for departure had come, but I put off giving the order to move. I wanted terribly to see Zosia once again, even if only for a moment. But she had disappeared with her basket an hour and a half before, and apparently had still not returned.

To delay our departure a little longer I began to inspect the machine gun mounted on a tripod in the Dodge, a worried look on my face. I busied myself with it for several minutes, but still Zosia did not appear. Then, despising and cursing myself for my weakness and inability to master my feelings, I went once more around the little column of eight trucks, giving some last-minute instructions to the commanders and drivers. When I came back round to the Dodge I looked furtively at my watch: further delay was impossible.

Standing by the side of the road I looked at *Pani* Julia's house for the last time, with bitterness and sorrow; having made up my mind at last, I commanded loudly:

"Prepare to move out!"

I jumped lightly into the Dodge and straightened up, listening to the command being passed back to the end of the column. At that same instant I caught sight of Zosia.

She was running towards us from the house as fast as her legs would carry her, shouting something. I thought for a second that she was embarrassed for the way she had behaved toward Victor the evening before, and that in order to smooth over her excessive sharpness she had decided to say good-bye to him, to wish him a "hundred years", as *Pani* Julia, Stefan, and the other villagers had.

She reached us at last, quite out of breath, but did not rush towards Victor, as I had expected. Instead, she shoved an envelope into my hands, and said something hurriedly, holding up three fingers.

"Not to look inside for three days," said Stefan, smiling rather slyly.

I blushed, and thanked her mechanically, little knowing what I said. Then I sat down on the bench along the side. Victor did not seem to even look round.

The engine was revving loudly, but the truck had not started off yet. Zosia's face was tense and frightened—there were tears in her eyes. Suddenly she snatched my head in her hands and kissed me forcefully on the lips.

I came to my senses only when we were out of the village. I had never before been kissed by a woman—except of course my mother and grandmother.

My first impulse, my first desire, was to return. Even if only for a moment. But how in the world could I?

We travelled fast in the gathering dusk without turning on our narrow slits of headlights. The darkness got thicker and thicker, dissolving the outlines of the road, of the individual bushes and trees. The tall, dense forest stretched out on both sides of the road in a black, silent mass. In places it came right up to the edge of the road.

I sat on a box by the machine gun, peering ahead and to the sides, with my palms on the gun's rough handles, I was ready at any moment to make an accustomed, almost simultaneous movement with my two thumbs: the left would lift the safety, the right would press the trigger and release a deadly rain of bullets on any possible adversary.

I had forbidden smoking and loud talking along the way. And anyway the sudden change had been stunning enough for the men: not a voice, no unnecessary sound could be heard from the trucks behind us.

Motors growled evenly and quietly in the evening stillness of the forest; tires swished. The only other sound was the young radio operator in our Dodge (the one with the bandaged head; he had refused to go off to the hospital) trying to establish contact with brigade headquarters. As he had four days back, he kept repeating doggedly: "Smolensk! Smolensk! This is Penza! This is Penza! Why don't you answer! Over..."

We were moving towards the unknown, towards new battles in which many of us would die. Once again I would command at least a hundred grown-up and experienced men, destroying the enemy and "showing exemplary courage and personal heroism" at every step. And I was a rag, a snot, a milksop! I had not even been able... Had not even dared... I was incapable of so much as giving a girl a hint about my feelings! God, how I cursed myself!

Victor sat motionless, erect and stern beside the driver, peering into the twilight where, two hundred yards ahead, the brigade commander's armoured utility vehicle, which he had

given us as a vanguard, was moving along steadily. He was humming a marching song to himself. A little later he turned around sharply, brushing the antenna with his elbow, and grabbed the bouquet *Pani Julia* had given him. Evidently he had just remembered about it.

"Like a wreath," he said angrily, and flung the flowers into the ditch beside the road. "Namby-pamby sentimentalism!"

And once again the motors growled steadily in the tense silence, and the radio operator repeated his stubborn incantation, calling brigade headquarters.

"What's in that envelope?" Karev kept whispering. "Let's have a look."

"What do you mean, 'have a look'? You heard what she said: three days!"

But I could not wait. That evening, at our first stop, I went off quietly to one side. Covering myself totally under my ground-sheet, I turned on my flashlight and opened the envelope. Inside, folded in a piece of paper was a photograph of Zosia, no doubt taken before the war—a pretty adolescent girl with dimpled cheeks, short braids sticking out, and a tender, naively trusting expression on her childish face.

On the other side, scrawled in a hasty, uneven hand, were the words: "*Ja cię kocham, a ty spisz!*"*

7

Cities are taken by bravery, that much is true. My friend Victor—Victor Stepanovich Baikov, Hero of the Soviet Union—was among the first Soviet troops to enter Berlin. And there he remained forever, under a stone marker in the Treptow Park. But as to how women are won over... Even today, at twice the age, I find it hard to say; it seems to be something complicated, something that there is no universal recipe for.

I was no more than a boy then, full of dreams, and there was so much I did not understand—that was so long ago! But even now I feel a pang whenever I remember the little Polish village of Nowy Dwór, and Zosia, and my very first kiss.

I can see her as if she stood before my eyes: small but well-built and remarkably pretty; swinging her little basket on her arm, stepping lightly and nimbly on her dainty feet—as if she

* I love you, but you're asleep! (*Polish*)—Tr.

were dancing—she passes through the orchard, humming some happy melody ... her face blazing, she sits indignant at the table, head high, her bosom heaving with defiance, the tiny silver crucifix over her flowered blouse. It all comes back to me so clearly; I remember even her freckles, even the minute dot of a birth-mark on the lobe of her tiny ear. Now she is full of child-like gaiety and mirth; now she is stern and proud, almost haughty; now overflowing with exquisite tenderness, coquetry, and budding femininity. I see her too at the moment we parted: the tense, frightened face, the eyebrow trembling like a child's, the tears in the corners of her eyes.

I have thought of her so many times in the years since then, and she has overshadowed all others. She is probably different now, but I cannot—and do not want to—picture her as changed, older. Even now the feeling haunts me that I really did sleep through something very important, that I missed something exceptional and unique.

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